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Square Pegs

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# SQUARE PEGS

A RHYMED FANTASY FOR

TWO GIRLS     *By Clifford Bax*





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*By the Same Author*

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1912. (*Out of print.*) Goschen

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SQUARE PEGS





# SQUARE PEGS

*A Rhymed Fantasy for Two Girls*

BY

CLIFFORD BAX

LONDON: HENDERSONS

66 CHARING CROSS ROAD, W.C.

1920



77.  
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J. S.

To

H. F. RUBINSTEIN

997853

*This play was first performed at Farthingstone on June 19th, 1919, by Phyllis Reid (Hilda Gray) and Margot Sieveking (Gioconda), having been written at their request.*

# SQUARE PEGS

## CHARACTERS.

HILDA - - - A MODERN GIRL.  
GIOCONDA - - - A FIFTEENTH CENTURY VENETIAN.

## SCENE.

*A Garden. Entrance right and left. Left, a table and two chairs. (The general effect should suggest a little lawn which leads outward in several directions.)*

*The arrival of a taxicab is heard, off. Enter left, HILDA in summer hat and dress and with a light cloak on her arm. She carries a folding-map and a small book.*

HILDA (*speaking off, left*).

What's that? As certain as your name's Joe Billings  
The taximeter points at fifteen shillings.  
Well, and you've had a pound. What? Made a slip?  
*I* thought five shillings was a handsome tip.  
You want my father's home-address? 'The Haven,  
Chad Crescent, Baystead, North-West 57.'  
He'll write you out a cheque—I'm sure he will.

[*Sound of a motor-horn growing fainter.*

The creature's gone. These taxi-men! But still—  
At last I've found the Enchanted Garden . . . Wait:  
Suppose that isn't really Merlin's Gate,  
Nor this the garden where a girl who loathes  
Our Twentieth Century (all except its clothes)

## SQUARE PEGS

May turn the Book of Time to any page  
And find herself back in a lovelier age?  
The map will show. Yes, there's the gate, and there's  
That wall, that table, these two empty chairs . . .  
Everything's right. How wonderful, how splendid,  
To know that here the roar of time has ended!  
Now, let me see . . . *[Consulting her map.]*

If I should take that road  
What century should I have for my abode?  
'To Ancient Rome.' Lovely!  
*[She starts to go out, right. Then stops.]*  
It might be serious,

Though, if I chanced on Nero or Tiberius.  
The Romans had no manners . . . This way here—  
So the map says—would lead me to the year  
Ten-sixty-six. I won't be such a fool  
As go back where I stuck so long at school.  
William the First was always dull. I know  
He'd make me listen to him—standing so,  
With Bayeux hands, knee crookèd, and neck bowed—  
While he read all the Domesday Book aloud.  
I shan't go there . . . Now, that's a pretty view!

*[Referring to the map.]*  
'The Eighteenth Century: Boswell Avenue.'  
I might try that. But no—that won't do either.  
I'd have to wear a wig or tell them why there,  
Love coffee-houses more than trees and birds  
And talk in such tremendously long words.  
I know, I know! If I can find the way  
I'll wander back into the sumptuous day  
When, in his gardens near the warm lagoon,

## SQUARE PEGS

Titian gave feasts under the stars and moon.  
That would be heavenly! Those were noble times.  
There was a grandeur even about the crimes  
Of people like the Borgias . . . and their dresses,  
And the sweet way they wore their hair in tresses,  
And—oh, and everything! What was Titian's date?  
I mustn't err into a time too late;  
But how to make quite sure? I'll take a look  
In this adorable fire-coloured book—  
Addington Symonds . . . Oh, that I knew more!  
Was it in fifteen-sixty or before?

*[Settling herself in one of the chairs, she becomes absorbed in her book. Enter, right, GIOCONDA carrying two or three modern novels.]*

GIOCONDA (*speaking off, right*).

I thank you, gondolier. You drowned my nurse  
With true dramatic finish. Take this purse.  
So—I am in that Garden where time speeds  
Backward or forward as our fancy needs.  
How sick I am of cloaks and ambuscades,  
Of poison, daggers, moonlight serenades,  
Of those dull dances that are all *I* get—  
Pavane, gavotte, forlana, minuet—  
And the long pageant of our life at Venice!  
Now, in the Twentieth Century there is tennis,  
With cream and strawberries round a chestnut-tree,  
And day-long idling in the June-blue sea,  
And soda-fountains, too, and motor-cars,  
And Henley Weeks and Russian Ballet 'stars.'  
Oh, what a wealth of joy that century has!

## SQUARE PEGS

To think that I myself may learn to jazz!  
Truly, I judge it has no slightest flaw—  
The glorious age of Bennett, Wells, and Shaw.

*[She sets her books on the table and curtsies to them.]*

Gramercy now—Shaw, Bennett, Wells, and Co.—  
Since you have shown me what I longed to know,  
How to behave, talk, smoke, and bob my hair  
In nineteen-twenty, when at last I'm there.  
Could I but find a guide! How shall I tell  
Which road to follow? If I listen well  
I ought to hear the roaring of their trains,  
Their motor-horns, their humming monoplanes . . .

*[She listens intently for a moment.]*

The very bees are silent . . . *[Seeing HILDA.]*

Who is that?

Surely, unless the books have lied, her hat  
Came from 'Roulette's,' in Portman Square, West One!  
A Twentieth-Century girl! The thing is done—  
I need but ask her which way London lies.

*[Kissing her hand, right.]*

Farewell, Rialto! Farewell, Bridge of Sighs!

*[She goes up to HILDA and curtsies ceremoniously.]*

Dear Signorina . . . Signorina . . . Deep  
In Bennett's fragrant works, or can she sleep?  
Could *The Five Towns* have bored her? Let me try  
Once more. Most noble Signorina . . .

HILDA (*starting up*).

Why,

Who are you, lady? By your dress and ways  
I think you must have come from Titian's days.



## SQUARE PEGS

GIOCONDA.

Indeed, I do. Old Titian! How he talks!  
He did my portrait last July in chalks.  
But grant me the great liberty, I pray,  
Of asking what your name is . . .

HILDA.

Hilda Gray.

GIOCONDA.

How sweet and to the point!

HILDA.

And yours?

GIOCONDA.

Gioconda

Francesca Violante Giulia della Bionda.

HILDA.

It is a poem in itself! It shines  
Like the soft sheen on Tasso's velvet lines.  
What can have led you to forego an age  
When life was an illuminated page  
From some superb romance?

GIOCONDA.

And what, I wonder,  
Can have torn you and your rich time asunder?

HILDA.

I'll tell you, for I'm sure you'll sympathise.  
I have a lover . . .

GIOCONDA.

That is no surprise.

## SQUARE PEGS

HILDA.

And by the post this morning came a letter—

GIOCONDA.

From him ?

HILDA.

From him.

GIOCONDA.

What could have happened better ?

HILDA.

Ah ! naturally you think that Harry writes  
Of longing, suicide, and sleepless nights.  
Did he, I'd read his letters ten times over—  
But you don't know the Twentieth Century lover.  
Oh, for a man who'd write through tears, all swimmily,  
And woo me with grand metaphor and simile !  
I couldn't bear the slang that Harry used  
In asking for my hand.

GIOCONDA.

So you refused !

HILDA.

Yes, and came here to seek a braver time.

GIOCONDA.

How odd ! *I* had a letter, all in rhyme,  
Brought by a lackey to my father's gate  
Just when dawn broke. As if I couldn't wait !  
He dashed up, panting ; and his horse's mouth  
Was flecked with blood and foam . . .

## SQUARE PEGS

HILDA (*clasping her hands*).

The passionate South!

GIOCONDA.

The fellow gave the letter, gasped, went red,  
And straightway horse and lackey fell down dead.  
I scanned the note, observed the flowery phrases  
In which the writer smothered me with praises ;  
Compared them with the style of Bernard Shaw,  
And told him briskly that he might withdraw.

HILDA.

If I could see that letter!

GIOCONDA.

So you shall,  
Sweet friend—or, rather, right you are, old pal.  
I'll read it.

*[She produces a letter tied with rose-coloured ribbon.]*

HILDA

Do! . . . I see his passion's flood  
Demands red ink.

GIOCONDA.

Oh dear, no—that's his blood.  
Now, listen. Did you ever hear a style  
Quite so absurd? I call it simply vile. *[Reading.]*  
'Adored Gioconda—glittering star  
    Unsullied by the dusty world,  
    Rich rose with leaves but half uncurled,  
New Venus in thy dove-drawn car—  
Have pity : drive thy wrath afar .

## SQUARE PEGS

Let Cupid's war-flag be upfurled,  
Lest by thy gentle hand be hurled  
The mortal bolt that leaves no scar.

'So prays upon his aching knee  
Thy humble vassal, once the fear  
Of Christendom, but now—woe's me!—  
One whose wild prayers Love will not hear,  
Who treads the earth and has no home—  
Giulio Pandolfo, Duke of Rome.'

HILDA.

Gioconda, what a lover!

GIOCONDA.

So *I* think—  
His brain a dictionary, his blood mere ink.

HILDA.

Oh, but *I* mean how fine a lover! Would  
That mine could pen a letter half so good!

GIOCONDA.

How does he write?

HILDA.

Write! Would you deign to call  
*That* 'writing'—this illiterate blotted scrawl?

[*Reading.*

'Dear Hilda, if you buy *The Star*  
To-night, you mustn't for the world  
Suppose he got my hair uncurled—  
That blighter who kyboshed the car.  
He had the worst of it by far

## SQUARE PEGS

Because the hood on mine was furled.  
Good Lord! what steep abuse he hurled!  
Yours, Harry—with a nasty scar.

‘P.S.—The cut’s above the knee,  
And won’t be right just yet, I fear  
Oh, and what price you marrying me?  
Anything doing? Let me hear.  
Ring up to-morrow, if you’re home.  
Where shall we do our bunk? To Rome?’

Now, wasn’t that enough to make me mad?  
It is a shame! It really is too bad!  
‘Dear Hilda’—plain ‘dear’! And what girl could marry  
A man who, when proposing, ends ‘yours, Harry’?

GIOCONDA.

I love his downright manner. In my mind  
I see him, a tall figure; and, behind,  
His old two-seater. Yes, I see him plainly—  
Close-cropped—

HILDA.

Half bald.

GIOCONDA.

Slow-moving—

HILDA.

And ungainly.

GIOCONDA.

A brow like H. G. Wells’ my fancy draws,  
An eye like Bennett’s and a beard like Shaw’s.  
I know your Harry—just the English type,  
A silent strong man married to his pipe,

## SQUARE PEGS

With so few words, except about machines,  
That he can never tell you what he means :  
But were *I* his, and we two went a-walking,  
What should that matter ? *I* could do the talking.

HILDA.

Surely you see, Gioconda, I require  
A lover who can make love with some fire.

GIOCONDA.

And I a lover so much overcome  
By deep emotion that it leaves him dumb.

HILDA.

No poetry ? 'Then, so far as I can tell,  
The Twentieth Century ought to suit you well . . .  
I've an idea !

GIOCONDA.

What is it ?

HILDA.

This : that you  
Show me how best you'd like a man to woo.

GIOCONDA.

I will, I will !

HILDA.

Imagine, then, that I  
Am she for whom you say you'd gladly die.  
This is my room at Baystead : that's the street :  
You must come in from there— [*Leading her, left.*]  
and then we meet.

## SQUARE PEGS

GIOCONDA.

By Holy Church, a pretty sport to play!  
God shield you, Signorina Hilda Grey! [Exit left.

HILDA.

Now—what's the time? It must be half-past four.  
It is. I'll give him just one minute more.

[Looking at herself in a pocket-mirror, and making a toilet.

Goodness! I do look horrid... Will he bring  
An emerald or a pearl engagement-ring?  
He comes! I'll take pearls as a last resort.

*Enter, left, GIOCONDA (carrying a pipe and a walking-stick).*

GIOCONDA.

Well, and how *are* you? In the pink, old sport?

HILDA.

I'm glad to see you, Harry. Do sit down.

GIOCONDA.

'Some' heat to-day, what? Even here. In town  
Perfectly awful. Got a match?

[She tries in vain to light the pipe from a match struck  
by HILDA.

I say,

Old thing—you really look top-hole to-day.

HILDA.

Well, naturally: I knew that you were coming.

[GIOCONDA pulls at her pipe in silence, pokes the floor  
with her stick, and shifts it from hand to hand.

You're very quiet.

## SQUARE PEGS

GIOCONDA (*with a start*).

Oh! what's that you're thumbing?  
[*Goes over to HILDA and looks over her shoulder.*]

HILDA.

Addington Symonds.

GIOCONDA.

Any good?

HILDA.

Why—gorgeous!  
You ought to read it—all about the Borgias.

GIOCONDA.

What are they? Oh, I see! I had enough  
Up at the 'Varsity of that sort of stuff.  
I say—oh, blast the thing, this pipe's a dud!  
[*She puts the pipe on the table.*]

HILDA.

You smoke too much. They say it slows the blood,  
And *that* you simply can't afford. [Pause.]

GIOCONDA.

I say—

HILDA.

Well, what?

GIOCONDA.

You really look top-hole to-day.

HILDA.

How nice! But flattery always was your wont. [Pause.]



## SQUARE PEGS

GIOCONDA.

I say—

HILDA.

That's just it, Harry dear—you don't.

GIOCONDA.

I came to ask you something . . . [*Producing a ring.*

Ever seen

A ring like this? Not a bad sort of green.

HILDA (*taking it*).

Emeralds! I worship emeralds. They enthrone

All the luxuriant summer in a stone.

Do let me just see how it looks! The third

Finger, I think, is generally preferred?

How splendid! Won't she be delighted?

GIOCONDA.

Who?

HILDA.

Your dear Aunt Kate.

GIOCONDA.

I bought the thing for you.

HILDA.

Harry!

GIOCONDA.

You know—a what-d'you-call-it ring.

HILDA.

Engagement?

GIOCONDA.

That's the goods. And in the Spring

The parson gets our guinea. What about it?

## SQUARE PEGS

HILDA.

See, how it fits! I couldn't do without it.

GIOCONDA.

Right-o! Then, that's that: good. But if you carry  
A diary, jot down, 'Next Spring, marry Harry'—  
You might forget. You've got a diary?

HILDA (*bringing a small diary from her bag*).

Look—

I did blush—buying an engagement-book!

GIOCONDA.

Well, how's the enemy? Good Lord! what a shock!  
D'you know, old bean, it's more than five o'clock?

HILDA.

You'll have some tea?

GIOCONDA.

Can't. Sorry. Told two men  
I'd play a foursome with them at 5.10.  
You'd better make the fourth.

HILDA.

I really can't.  
I've got some new delphiniums I *must* plant.

GIOCONDA (*going out, left*).

See you to-morrow, then.

HILDA.

You'll drive me frantic  
If you're not just the teeniest bit romantic!

## SQUARE PEGS

GIOCONDA.

It isn't done. You're absolutely wrong  
In asking me to do that stunt. So long!

[*She tosses the pipe and stick off, left.*]

There! Did I play it well? You'd be my wife?

HILDA (*sighing*).

My dear, you played old Harry to the life—  
His gaucherie . . .

GIOCONDA.

His noble self-command . . .

HILDA.

The way he shifts his cane from hand to hand . . .

GIOCONDA.

A nervous trick that shows how much he feels . . .

HILDA.

All I know is—I'd have a man who kneels  
And pours out passion in a style as rippling  
As the best Swinburne—or at least as Kipling.

GIOCONDA.

Then I'll now be *your* lady. To your part—  
Woo me as you'd be wooed!

HILDA.

With all my heart!

[*Catching up her cloak, she flings it over her shoulder.*]

Last Miracle of the World, sainted, adored,  
Divine Gioconda—hear me, I beg!

## SQUARE PEGS

GIOCONDA.

My lord!

HILDA.

Dost know of passion? Is that heart so pure  
As not to guess what torments I endure  
Who for so long have sighed for thee in vain?  
And wilt thou have no pity on my pain?  
Wilt thou still spurn me as a thing abhorred  
Whose only crime is to love thee?

GIOCONDA.

My lord—

HILDA.

Stay! I will brook no answer. For thy sake  
Did I not paint the town in crimson-lake?  
Have I not wrenched thee through thy nunnery-bars?  
And bear I not some ninety-seven scars  
Taken as I fought my way to thy fair feet?  
Think how thy relatives rushed into the street  
To save thee—how I put them to the sword  
And left them strewn about in heaps!

GIOCONDA.

My lord—

HILDA.

Had I a boy's light love when I, to win  
Thy favour, cut off all thy kith and kin?  
Run through the list! Measure my love by that!  
Two great-grandfathers (one, I own, was fat);  
Five brothers; fourteen uncles; half a score  
Of nephews (and I dare say even more);  
A brace of maiden-aunts; a second-cousin;

## SQUARE PEGS

And family connections by the dozen.  
Does it not melt that pitiless heart of ice  
To see thyself secured at such a price ?

GIOCONDA.

My lord—

HILDA.

Or if indeed thy heart requires  
Flame fiercer than my love's Etnaeian fires—  
Ask what thou wilt, but do not ask that I  
Live on. Command me, rather, how to die.  
Say in what style thou'dst have me perish here,  
So that at least my ardour win one tear !  
Choose what thou wilt—I'll execute thy charge—  
Nor fear to speak : my repertoire is large.  
I can suspend myself upon a rafter ;  
Fall on my blade, and die with horrid laughter ;  
Leap from a height ; read Bennett's books ; or swallow  
Poison—and, mark you, with no sweet to follow.

GIOCONDA.

My lord—

HILDA.

Thy choice is made ?

GIOCONDA.

My lord—

HILDA.

Alack !

GIOCONDA.

I have accepted thee ten minutes back.

## SQUARE PEGS

HILDA.

Then—I will deign to live. My castle stands  
Four-towered among its olive-silvered lands.

Away! Away! Thou art all heaven to me!

[*She drags GIOCONDA right. They break.*]

GIOCONDA.

Wonderful! That's Pandolfo to a tee!

HILDA.

I should adore him!

GIOCONDA.

And I Harry, too . . .

If only you were I and I were you!

But soft! since here we stand beyond the range  
Of Time, why don't we swop?

HILDA.

You mean 'exchange'?

Why not? We will!

[*Moving quickly, right.*]

May Titian's age enfold me!

GIOCONDA.

Stop! Stop! You can't go yet. You haven't told me  
Where I can find the Twentieth Century.

HILDA (*leading her front, and pointing to the audience*).

Then,

Behold its ladies and its gentlemen.

GIOCONDA.

What lovely people! . . . All the same, you know,  
They're not as I have pictured them.

## SQUARE PEGS

HILDA.

How so?

GIOCONDA.

They're all so still . . . And then— my fancy boggles  
To see not one who's wearing motor-goggles!  
How can I get among them?

HILDA.

You must jump

Down there.

GIOCONDA.

But that would mean a dreadful bump!

HILDA.

You want to go from fifteen-sixty sheer  
To nineteen-twenty. 'Tis a jump, my dear . . .  
And so—farewell! I come, I come at last—  
O fire and sound and perfumes of the Past!

*[She goes out quickly, right.]*

GIOCONDA.

Her eyes were green. However hard he tries,  
Pandolfo never can resist green eyes.  
I know he'll die for her and not for me.  
Why did I let her go? It shall not be!

*[HILDA enters, right.]*

HILDA.

It shall not be! Why did I let her go?  
Harry will love her more than me, I know.  
Gioconda!

GIOCONDA.

Hilda!

## SQUARE PEGS

HILDA.

Somehow, after all,  
I can't let Harry go beyond recall.  
I think of his good heart: I know how proud  
I'll be to watch him through a dusty cloud  
When his new car, balanced upon one tire,  
Rolls roistering through the lanes of Devonshire.

GIOCONDA.

I too, fair friend, perceive with sudden terror  
The greatness of my momentary error.  
I mustn't let you risk the enterprise . . .  
Pandolfo never could endure green eyes!

HILDA.

Let us each make the best of her own age!

GIOCONDA.

But sometimes you will write me—just a page?

HILDA.

I will indeed. And you?

GIOCONDA.

And so will I.

Hilda—farewell!

HILDA.

Gioconda, dear—good-bye!

*[Standing in the middle of the stage, they take hands  
and kiss. Then they come to the front, left and  
right.]*

So ends our fantasy—the slight design  
Arisen and gone like sound in summer trees,



## SQUARE PEGS

GIOCONDA.

The burden such as every mind may seize—  
That in all centuries life is goodly wine!

HILDA.

Which has the more of joy, her age or mine,  
We leave you to determine as you please.

GIOCONDA.

Mine has the painting-schools—the Sienese,  
Venetian and unchallenged Florentine.

HILDA.

Mine has the knowledge that our mortal pains  
Are fleeing from the skilled physician's arts.

GIOCONDA.

Mine the delight of unspoiled hills and plains,  
Fair speech, adventure, and romantic hearts.

HILDA.

And mine a sense that, by the single sun  
That all men share, the world for man is one.

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# COTERIE *A Quarterly*

## ART, PROSE AND POETRY

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